

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Die Komödie. Eine Theatralische Sendung: Grundlagen und Interpretationen by Bernhard Greiner

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tion are still with us today, alive and well but not quite recognized other than through their representation in artefacts from the medieval past. Linearity co-exists with non-linear structures, and the life span of certain root paradigms outlasts that of generations of people. What if we began to take seriously the possibility of a dialogue with the past, open-ended, interdisciplinary in orientation?

It would go beyond the scope of this brief review to discuss in depth this and other sets of criteria used by Professor Tobin. Perhaps most vexing is the one problem underlying all others: what approach can garner the most understanding of a medieval mystical text? And what shall one give preference to: form (the Germanists' position, according to Professor Tobin) or content (the domain of historians, theologians, psychologists, feminists, according to the author)? Sympathetic to the latter, Professor Tobin in the end seems to champion the cause of his own guild, only to confess that mysticism cannot be captured in any butterfly net.

Where does such infinite caution leave the reader who expects some help in cutting the Gordian knot? I wish that Professor Tobin had shown just a bit more boldness, a bit more intellectual courage. It is the loss of an intriguing opportunity that he allowed the form of his book – a chronological rendering of the works of others rather than a systematic and rigorous thematic analysis and clearly stated thesis – to stifle its content: his yearning to wed his appreciation of mysticism to the challenges of scholarly methodologies. What would Mechthild have to say about all of this?

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Bernhard Greiner: *Die Komödie. Eine Theatralische Sendung: Grundlagen und Interpretationen*. Tübingen: Francke, 1992. X, 512 pp. DM 39,80.

Greiner's book consists of two parts, a general discussion of comedy and a series of interpretations of German comedies. Part One considers overarching categories central to comedy and reviews many of the best-known theorists. Avoiding any definition of the genre, Greiner focuses instead on a dialectic, which is apparent already in the origin of the genre: How does what transcends description, such as the orgiastic, the ineffable, and laughter, become transformed into text and material for the stage? How does the dissolving moment of the Dionysian or the carnivalesque take on Apollonian form? The work opens with a comparison of Biblical and Homeric views of laughter and an analysis of four major non-German comedians or traditions, Aristophanes, Shakespeare, the commedia dell'arte, and Moliere. It then considers almost every major theoretician of comedy and laughter: Hobbes, Kant, Bergson, and Hegel under the rubric «Komik der Herabsetzung»; Baudelaire, Nietzsche, and Bachtin under the rubric «Komik der Heraufsetzung»; and Ritter, Freud, and Stierle under the rubric «Mediale Begründungen des Komischen.» Greiner relates these summaries to his overarching focus: the transformation of the carnivalesque into form.

Part Two analyzes major works of German comedy from the Baroque to the present. For the reader who knows this tradition and its secondary literature much of

what Greiner says will be familiar. The choices of authors and texts are predictable with the exception of Lenz's *Der neue Menoza* and Canetti's *Die Hochzeit*; the only arguable gaps are Raimund and Grillparzer. Although Greiner analyzes often-interpreted comedies with relatively few pages per work, some of the analyses do offer nuanced insights: for example, Lessing's dating of *Minna von Barnhelm* (182–84); the discussion of Kleist's *Amphitryon* in the context of the contemporary era (255–58); Jürgen Flimm's Cologne production of Büchner's *Leonce und Lena* in a circus setting (291–96); the hidden ambiguities of the Sternheim–Reinhardt relationship (346–48); Hofmannsthal's «Fehlleistungen» (356–58); and the complexities and ambiguities of Hacks's reception of Aristophanes (416–24). Also very effective, if not necessarily original, are the discussion of J. E. Schlegel and the introduction to Nestroy.

For the most part Greiner is able to integrate his general categories heuristically while analyzing the plays, which contributes to the organic nature of the volume – though Greiner misses a great opportunity to analyze the relationship between nihilism and formalism in Büchner's *Leonce und Lena*. For a study that looks at comedy in general and then focuses on German comedy, we receive, unfortunately, little insight into the central questions, in what ways does the German tradition of comedy differ from other European traditions and why is it generally not recognized as outstanding beyond the German borders.

Greiner's work will surely become a frequently cited reference tool. Few studies offer both a discussion of the theory of comedy and a survey of German comedy. Greiner's book is broader than Volker Klotz's *Bürgerliches Lachtheater*, more theoretical than Eckehard Catholy's survey and Hans Steffen's anthology, both titled *Das deutsche Lustspiel*, and more focused on plays than Grimm's and Berghahn's anthology *Wesen und Formen des Komischen im Drama*. As such it fills a need.

The book, however, is not without problems, especially in terms of genre theory. The explanation of comedy as a dialectic of the Dionysian and the Apollonian, though in some ways insightful, is hardly sufficient (Greiner only once refers to Nietzsche's having viewed the same constellation as giving rise to tragedy [106]). The question Greiner poses to comedy is in a sense the question of art in general, which is defined by the seemingly inexplicable interplay of «Sinnlichkeit und Intellekt» (96). A similar problem arises with the second category Greiner stresses, though not as frequently, doubling, which Hegel and Robert Heilman view as the defining category of tragedy. The questions that need to be asked are, what makes the interplay of the Dionysian and Apollonian tragic, what makes it comic? The same question needs to be asked of doubling. Greiner's categories for analyzing comedy do not reach the *differentia specifica* of the genre, and one wonders, why Greiner has left out, or quickly brushed by, those thinkers who may have grasped comedy in its difference from other genres? I'm thinking in particular of Vico and Hegel.

Greiner seeks to be inclusive in his definition, embracing as comic virtually any transgression of boundaries, but he views humor as problematic because it preserves, rather than transgresses, boundaries (220), but by excluding humor from comedy, Greiner suggests that humor transgresses the boundary of the comic, which makes it paradoxically a comic genre or which renders his definition either self-contradictory

or insufficient. Moreover, if, as seems apparent, the transgression of boundaries is a generally eminent principle, Greiner violates it when he excludes humor, for he can do so only by embracing a limit. In addition, Greiner views comedy as a genre in opposition to reason, but the dialectic is not always so simple; in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, for example, the Logician is mocked secondarily for elevating logic but primarily for transgressing the laws of logic even as he elevates them. The early Hegelians, who commented extensively on the comic, and the much ignored James Feibleman may have been closer to the essence of the genre than Greiner insofar as they recognized in comedy the logical structure of the negation of negativity.

Greiner's book is not without flaws, including some repetition and frequent use of abstract substantive-laden sentences, but it is on the whole a rich inquiry, comprehensive and full of detailed insights, from which many students will profit.

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P. M. Mitchell, *Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700–1766): Harbinger of German Classicism*. Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995. 131 pp. \$ 54.95.

With this book P. M. Mitchell, an authority on Gottsched and the general editor of his *Ausgewählte Werke*, attempts to set the record straight: neither Lessing's sarcastic remarks in the sixteenth and seventeenth *Literaturbrief* («Niemand wird läugnen [...] ich bin dieser Niemand») nor Gottsched's disagreement with Bodmer and Breitinger as to the evaluation of Shakespeare and Milton, whom he criticized while they praised them, should let us forget the central role he played in the intellectual life in Germany between ca. 1730 and 1750.

The author recounts Gottsched's life step by step and informs us about the contents of each of the major works. We read about his role in establishing standards for a new German drama and about his collaborating with Caroline Neuber and her theater troupe in Leipzig. Furthermore, Gottsched is the author of the standard grammar of the time, the *Grundlegung einer Deutschen Sprachkunst*, which, in one version or other and in different translations, had as many as 125 editions by 1840 (p. 101). He put together successful books on rhetoric and philosophy and edited a number of influential journals, among them the well-known *Critische Beyträge*. All of Gottsched's writings reflect an Enlightenment orientation, with Christian Wolff and French thinkers as models. While in general he was more of a transmitter and organizer of knowledge than an innovator, his book on the use and misuse of certain German words must be recognized as a pioneering forerunner of H. W. Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*.

P. M. Mitchell is thoroughly acquainted with Gottsched and his voluminous output. As is well known and reaffirmed here, he was greatly helped in his many endeavors by his talented wife, Luise Adelgunde Victoria, who was also a successful dramatist and translator. The author presents his arguments without reference to previous scholarship, a decision that makes sense since the meaning of Gottsched's writings is never in doubt. It is his place in the intellectual history of Germany that is debatable.